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DE RUEHCP #0011/01 0070839
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 070839Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5397

UNCLAS COPENHAGEN 000011

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/NB

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [DA](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICAL ROUNDUP

REF: 09 COPENHAGEN 539

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: As Danes return from the Christmas/New Year holidays, reactions to the Prime Minister's New Year address range from lukewarm to mocking, depending on the political leaning of the commentator. The pundits' chief preoccupation is increasingly to speculate about the cabinet reshuffle that is widely expected before long. END SUMMARY.

DANISH POLITICS RETURNING TO NORMAL

2.(SBU) Following the dramatic and exhausting COP-15 and the Christmas/New Year holidays, Danish politics is returning to normal. A still tired-looking PM Rasmussen turned his attention to the domestic audience with a series of TV interviews, admitting that the COP-15 outcome could have been better and that the "artistic impression" of the performance's final hours was not impressive, while insisting that the Danish Government could not be blamed for the outcome. These interviews were followed by more informal appearances, accompanied by wife Solrun on both national TV networks' 2009-in-Review shows.

13. (SBU) Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of the Danish People's Party (DPP), whose support is indispensable to the ruling coalition, used a December 30 interview in the daily Berlingske Tidende to urge the PM to focus on the domestic political scene and use his (customary) New Year's address to outline the Government's direction and "show the Danes who he is." She also stressed the need for a cabinet reshuffle.

14. (SBU) Several commentators also raised expectations for the PM's New Year address. Several surveys presented on the front pages December 31 also highlighted the need for a sharper profile for the PM and the Government: a Gallup cabinet rating in Berlingske showed the PM's personal approval rating up from 44% a year ago to 56%, but twelve of the other 18 cabinet members fell in the ratings, especially Deputy PM and Conservative leader Lene Espersen (down from 66 to 51). Equally serious, a Jyllands-Posten "Ramboell/Analyse Danmark" survey indicated that less than a third of the voters find that the PM has laid out a "clear political vision," and almost one fourth expressed no opinion. Even fewer perceive shadow PM Helle Thorning-Schmidt as having a clear political vision. Thorning-Schmidt (leader of the largest opposition party, the SDP) has been notably absent from the end-of-year political debate. Her husband (son of Lord Kinnock, former leader of the British Labour Party) celebrated his 40th birthday January 1, and that may have been a distraction for her.

LOW-KEY NEW YEAR ADDRESSES

15. (SBU) Queen Margrethe II's New Year's Eve address is a cherished tradition; nearly all Danes stop what they are doing and watch/listen. It is supposed to be devoid of political content, but in past years it has contained moral or ethical signals. Not so

this year - a reminder that her speech is inspired and vetted by the PM's Office. The Queen stressed that the new economic situation makes it even more important that we appreciate and assist Denmark's youth, but also warned against excessive "youth fixation" among the older generations, and more respect and appreciation for the experience and wisdom that come with age. Most controversial was the Queen's appreciation for all involved in making COP-15 possible, especially her praise for the police for handling security "responsibly and in the best possible way." Several commentators found it curious that the Queen offered no mention of last June's referendum giving full gender equality for heirs to the throne.

¶6. (SBU) The Prime Minister's customary New Year's evening speech generally has a sizeable audience, and this was Lars Loekke Rasmussen's first. With many pundits and politicians having raised expectations for the speech, it disappointed those expecting a new vision and specific political initiatives. Rasmussen decided to play it safe, using his warmer and more personable approach on camera to inspire trust and confidence that the country is in safe hands with him at the helm. The PM referred to the dying decade as the "zeroes" which brought unprecedentedly high employment in mid-2008, but now a serious downturn. He said the worst appears to be over, and affirmed that the Government is in control of the situation. The tax cuts introduced in 2009 take effect this year and will put more money in consumers' pockets. Turning briefly to the international agenda, he paid special tribute to the Danish troops in Afghanistan. On COP-15, he stressed that it had succeeded - "during some hectic and not especially stylish final hours" - in reaching "a climate understanding."

¶7. (SBU) Returning to the domestic agenda, the PM argued for a free, equal, just, respectful, tolerant and safe Denmark, which both offers opportunities and security for those in need. "The Danish dream unites us," the PM asserted, emphasizing the importance of the Government's "Growth Forum" which starts working this month. His core message was that Denmark's principal resources are human beings and knowledge, therefore it is important to continue strengthening the public elementary school system. Finally, he stressed that to meet the challenges of the future, Denmark welcomes the contribution of immigrants: "In just one generation, half a million Danes will have a non-Western background. We need each and every one of you."

¶8. (SBU) The only policy area given specific attention in the address was the public elementary school, just one of the PM's ten goals for 2020 put forward at his party convention in November (reftel).

¶9. (SBU) Reports late January 1 of a foiled attack on "Muhammad cartoonist" Kurt Westergaard distracted much of the attention usually given the PM's New Year's address. Several newspapers pointed to the contrast between the PM's speech and Conservative leader/Deputy PM Espersen's appeal for extensive economic reforms (in her New Year message on the party's home page). DPP leader Kjaersgaard offered this take on the speech: "I'm overall positively surprised. There is some vision in it, and considering the limited time available, he addresses important issues like cancer treatment, gang crime and the public elementary school." However, she did not appreciate the PM's welcoming message to Danes from non-Western backgrounds. These two reactions illustrate the PM's dilemma: his Conservative coalition partners want reform while the support party DPP does not, except when it comes to tightening immigration laws.

OPPOSITION REACTS AS EXPECTED

¶10. (SBU) Reactions from the opposition were predictable, with Socialist People's Party leader Villy Soevndal the most prominent critic.

¶11. (SBU) Villy Soevndal was piqued by the PM's "rosy picture" of COP15: "I'm not aware of anybody else, either nationally or internationally, who agrees with Lars Loekke Rasmussen's assessment." His assessment of the speech in general: "It's surprising that the PM has so little to offer. I had expected he would take the opportunity to set a new agenda and share his vision for Denmark's future. The only surprise is that he talks about greed growing out

of proportion - and that is impressive - on the day when enormous tax cuts for the richest take effect. " Soevndal further contributed to the New Year political debate with an extensive Berlingske op-ed headlined "The Government Deceives the Danish Values, " arguing that the Danish welfare society's values are being eroded and the Government is responsible for declining solidarity and growing inequality causing divisions.

¶12. (SBU) Representing the leading opposition party SDP, Vice Chair Nick Haekkerup commented: "It's a speech that probably fits well with how most Danes feel on January 1: without energy, initiative or zest. The PM leally missed the chance to profile himself, and the speech is devoid of concrete content showing the Danes where he plans to take our society. "

¶13. (SBU) Margrethe Vestager, leader of the third opposition party, the Social Liberals, offered this assessment of the speech: "It was a sympathetic and smart speech - but weak. Many, many words of sympathy for the friendly society threatened from the outside. It's clever - all problems come from the outside. " She raised serious questions about the PM's plans for improving reading qualifications among the youngest in the public elementary schools.

JANUARY AGENDA AND RESHUFFLE SPECULATION

¶14. (SBU) Except for the Climate Minister and the PM being summoned by the parliamentary opposition for consultations and follow-up on COP-15, the political agenda appears rather empty until the PM's late-January meetings to discuss the future of the Danish public elementary school. But the left-wing opposition will almost certainly accuse the Government of implementing irresponsible tax cuts and not doing enough to address the growing public deficit and unemployment.

¶15. (SBU) Undoubtedly the favorite preoccupation of political pundits will be speculation about the timing and extent of a cabinet reshuffle. Taking as its starting point a Megafon poll conducted December 15-16 showing that 21% of voters want Justice Minister (and key Conservative Party figure) Brian Mikkelsen out of the Government, the daily Politiken Sunday offered an elaborate feature predicting an extensive reshuffle within the next few months. Much speculation centered on whether Lene Espersen intends to move to the Foreign Ministry. Politiken further predicted that the Conservatives would bring in new ministers from outside the parliament, while the PM's own Venstre (Liberal Party) would recruit from within the parliament. The most likely ministers to lose their jobs, according to the newspaper, are Science and Technology Minister Helge Sander, Development Cooperation Minister Ulla Toernaes, Food, Agriculture and Fisheries Minister Eva Kjer Hansen, and Refugees, Immigration and Integration Minister Birthe Roenn Hornbech, who also holds the Ecclesiastical Affairs portfolio. We can expect many more speculations until the reshuffle actually happens.

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